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SONGS AS MORAL VEHICLES: A FUNCTIONALIST STUDY OF *ÌJUSU* FESTIVAL SONGS IN *ÌLÀJẸ́-ÈTIKÀN*, ONDO STATE, NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

African researchers have written extensively on indigenous festivals. However, little scholarly attention has been given to the Ìjusu festival among the Ìlàjẹ́-Ètikàn people of Ondo State, Nigeria. This study, therefore, examines Ìjusu festival songs as an aesthetic tool of moral indoctrination and cultural preservation. Data were gathered through participant observation, and the analysis is anchored in the functionalist theories of Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown and Bascom. The study interrogates the interplay between artistic form and socio-cultural purpose, revealing how the festival songs perform didactic, socialising and regulatory roles amidst entertainment. Within the expression of communal joy lies a profound quest for moral instruction, admonition and social harmony. These moral quests are accentuated through skillful artistic manipulation and the deployment of stylistic nuances such as imagery, metaphorical expressions, repetition, personification and proverbs. Beyond their aesthetic appeals, the songs reinforce indigenous ethical codes, affirm social cohesion and sustain the people's cultural worldview against the encroachment of modernity. The songs embody admonition motifs, as they indoctrinate the folks on virtues such as personal responsibility, hard work, forgiveness and reconciliation, peace building, contentment, respect for boundaries and communal unity. The study concludes that Yorùbá festival songs, exemplified in Ìjusu, constitute an archive of indigenous philosophy and morality. Appreciating their moral significance, thus, requires a grounded knowledge of the people's cultural backgrounds.

Keywords: Communal quests, *Ìjusu*, festival songs, functionalism.

Introduction

Festivals are artistic cultural performances organised to commemorate memorable and historical moments within indigenous societies. They are indigenous to the communities that stage them and, as a result, they mirror the socio-cultural beliefs, values and mores of the folks through unwritten scripts that dramatise communal life. These performances are not mere spectacles; they embody both "art" and "act". They are creative expressions that project and preserve the cultural essence of the people. As communal celebrations, they reflect and refract the wholeness of human experience, while blending artistry with devotion. To this end, Ogunba (1978) describes traditional festivals as indigenous cultural institutions, the forms of art nurtured on African soil over the centuries with distinctive aesthetics and techniques that differ from the borrowed form now practised by many contemporary artists. Re-echoing this view, Omosule (2009a) posits that Yoruba festivals, in particular, are indigenous performances that contain the philosophical aura and worldview of the people. They are moments of social,

religious and economic presentations, achieved through art. Thus, indigenous festivals are the embodiment of a people's philosophy, belief systems and identity.

Indigenous festivals are inextricably linked to the environment that nurtures them. The indigenous environment, much like any cultural ecosystem, encapsulates the moral, social, economic and religious sensibilities of its people. Within this milieu, belief systems, values and expressive forms evolve in dynamic interaction with the physical and cultural landscape. Environment, therefore, extends beyond geography; it encompasses the social, intellectual and spiritual traits that define a community's worldview. Hence, Omosule (2010) concedes that "the environment dictates the scripts and the meanings assigned to the texts". This implies that festivals can be fully understood when explicated in relation to the environmental context. In a similar vein, Soyinka (1988) maintains that "festival evolves and is celebrated in a specific physical environment where it naturally interacts with the environment, influenced by it, influences that environment in turn, and acts together with the environment in the larger and far more complex history of society". Consequently, environment and festivals have a symbiotic relationship. They are both reflective and refractive indices of human experience, mediating between ecological setting and cultural imagination in a continuous process of renewal. This reciprocity underscores the functional and dynamic nature of festivals.

As dynamic dramatic forms, indigenous African festivals embody multiple dimensions of the societal life. They serve diverse purposes and intentions, with quests that are essentially multi-layered and integrative. According to Omosule (2006), they are "periodically celebrated among folks towards achieving the quest for entertainment, registration of mores, amplification of artistic, cultural and religious dimensions of the society". This assertion underscores the pervasiveness of festivals whose functions transcend entertainment to include the education of the folks and the reinforcement of socio-economic, political, cultural, historical, therapeutic and religious sensibilities of indigenous communities. It is this multi-functional, multi-thematic and multi-dimensional nature that makes adherents of traditional religious practices hold indigenous festivals in profound esteem. The pervasiveness and versatility of such festivals derive largely from their role as the embodiment of other arts in human societies. They draw upon a range of indigenous aesthetic resources such as songs, dances, myths, legends, costumes, totems, panegyrics, proverbs and incantatory verses. All these resources serve as vehicles for expressing communal ideology and moral rectitude.

The aim of this paper, therefore, is to examine *Ìjusu* festival songs as aesthetic channels of moral indoctrination, cultural preservation and communal cohesion. The songs were purposively selected based on their thematic relevance to the discourse, particularly their embodiment of moral instruction and social commentary. Anchored in the functionalist theoretical framework, the study employs critical content analysis to interrogate the moral and social functions of these songs in a rapidly modernising indigenous society.

Performance Synopsis of *Ìjusu*

Ìjusu festival remains one of the prominent festivals among the people of *Ìlàjẹ-Ètikàn* in Ondo State, Nigeria. The festival is an annual event that marks the harvest of new yam as well as some significant occasions in the history of the people. There is a rich repertoire of aesthetics (poetic and dramatic) in the performance. It is usually a moment of joy and conviviality that combines thanksgiving with cleansing. The festival usually takes place in November. This

period falls between the end of the planting season and the harvest of new yam for the large percentage of the people who venture into farming in the kingdom. The ceremony is a significant landmark in the history of the people. Supplicatory rites are performed by the Chief Priest, "*Abójútórò*", before the commencement of the festival. This involves "*mímú usu wọ̀ọgwá lílá*" (the symbolic act of taking yam to the main square that houses the shrines). The priest chants incantations to invoke the deities and seek ancestral support. This act is usually accompanied with songs by the initiates in attendance.

The first day of the festival is otherwise known as "*Pálùmá*" or "*Páleèmá*". It marks the physical and spiritual cleansing of the land. The youth go on procession the following day. They sing, drum, pray and dance along. This act is synonymous with "*Ìkéde*", which literarily means "announcing the festival". It is an artistic means of creating awareness about the commencement of the festival. The third day witnesses the procession of the elders and chiefs. This is known as "*Ùrẹ́n Lílá*", which is akin to The Great Trek in South African history. *Ùrẹ́n Lílá* is a mimetic movement, a dramatic re-enactment of the peregrination of *Ìlàjẹ-Ètikàn* folks from *Ilé-Ifẹ̀*. During this procession, the elders and chiefs sing and pray for the peace of the land. The fourth day is "*Ileẹ̀fò*", meaning "a day of rest". This day affords the folks the privilege to deliberate on the course of actions in the kingdom. The fifth day is "*Ìwúyè*". The day is significant for a number of interesting activities. It is meant for the initiation of mature youths into the cult of *Ọ̀ghọ̀nẹ* and the conferment of chieftaincy on some worthy and loyal members of the kingdom. Activities on the sixth day, which is the eve of the grand finale, are puritanical. The elders, chiefs and *Abójútórò* converge at *Ojú-Ọgwá* (the traditional square that houses all shrines) to offer prayers to avert evil during the grand finale.

The seventh day witnesses a beehive of activities. It is the grand finale. It is usually one of the remarkable days in the kingdom. Early in the morning, every house in the kingdom will be masked and veiled with velvet attires (*aṣọ-àrán*) and *aṣọ-ọ̀fì* or *aṣọ-òkè*. *Ojú-Ọgwá* is also masked with new palm fronds. Each of the chiefs, princes and elders is expected to bring twelve tubers of newly harvested yams, especially male yams (*akọ uṣu*, *ẹja-ọ̀fọ́n* (shiny-nose fish) and other essential objects. Aged women are saddled with the roasting and cooking of the yams. Of utmost significance is the distribution or sharing of food on the last day. This is the duty of *Òdèlébà* who ensures no member of the kingdom, however lowly placed, is left out of this symbolic gesture. This singular act is a demonstration of "kinship" and "collectivism", which engenders peace in the kingdom.

Theoretical Framework

Functionalism forms the theoretical lens through which the selected *Ìjusu* festival songs are examined. The theoretical foundations of functionalism were developed by two leading anthropologists, Bronislaw Malinowski and A. R. Radcliffe-Brown. While Malinowski emphasises that indigenous performances must satisfy individual needs within a society, Radcliffe-Brown privileges the collective social structure over the individual. In his analogy, Radcliffe-Brown (1952) likens society to the human body, composed of various organs whose performance ensures the survival of the organism. When the heart like other parts of the body ceases to perform its function, the life process comes to an end and the living structure also comes to an end. By extension, the critic believes that indigenous performances serve essential "social functions". These performances have "value for the society as a whole, rather than their value for any particular individual member of society" (Barnard, 2000). In this sense,

literature and art are seen as social institutions that both shape and are shaped by the societies the produce them.

Functionalism foregrounds the utilitarian significance of indigenous performances. It maintains that every cultural performance serves a distinct purpose within the sociocultural milieu. In indigenous African societies, performances are created just for art's sake, but for life's sake. They are carefully structured to project the belief systems, moral codes and collective values. Okpewho (1983) lends credence to this through his opinion that every activity in a society has a practical use for its citizens and a specific place within the fabric of social norms. He further notes that functionalism investigates the peculiar network of needs in every society and the way in which this network ensures the contentment and survival of the social system. From this perspective, indigenous art becomes a vital mechanism for the preservation, sustenance and transmission of cultural traditions. Consequently, any performance that does not engage with the lived realities and moral consciousness of the people may not stand the test of time.

Indigenous festivals, by their very nature, exemplify the functionalist tenets. As Bascom (1954) observes, the folkloric elements perform four key functions— education, validation of culture, social control and the provision of escape mechanisms. Festivals, therefore, serve as indigenous constitutions that regulate communal life, affirm moral values and reinforce social order. The choice of functionalism as the theoretical framework for this study is this apposite, as it facilitates a deeper understanding of the moral imperatives and sociocultural dynamics embedded in *Ìjusu* festival songs. Through this lens, the analysis highlights the thematic concerns and utilitarian significance of the songs as instruments of moral instruction and cultural preservation within the *Ìlàjẹ-Ètikàn* community.

Application/Analysis

Songs are aesthetic resources through which moral values are articulated and transmitted. They are indispensable components of indigenous festivals, serving as expressive vehicles of moral and ethical consciousness. Just as a snail's existence is inseparable from its shells, the vitality of indigenous festivals is intrinsically bound to their songs, which embody artistic expressions of moral commitment. Festival songs are often classified as folksongs; they are polyrhythmic renditions rooted in the people's cosmology and collective belief system. In this regard, Ajimisan (2023) describes folksongs as "a complete corpus in the sense that they form the customary mirrors through which the rural dwellers see themselves". To this scholar, folksongs are the very blood that flows in the veins of the people and cords that "bolt" or bind the people to their root. This characterisation highlights the inseparability of folksongs from indigenous life, for they mirror the people's moral consciousness, cultural values and emotional realities. In essence, songs function as the indigenous encyclopedia (of lived experiences, moral codes, and artistic sensibilities) through which the act and art of a people are continually reflected and renewed, especially within rural contexts.

Songs are significant verbal elements in *Ìjusu* festival. They are coded functional genres that are dominant in the performance. During the festival, especially on the last day, several songs are rendered, accompanied by chanting, drumming, clapping and dancing. An in-depth understanding of the linguistic symbols and elements in festival songs helps to reveal the underlying quests, meaning and significance. *Ìjusu* festival songs are cultural expressions of

the people's beliefs and mores. The songs are topical, didactic and multi-thematic. They are polyrhythmic and "hold greater memories for the singers [and the folks] than do others". Some of these songs "have a greater aesthetic appeals, others have special meaning only at certain times" (Goldstein, 1975). The implication is that every indigenous festival song has the potential to bestow aesthetic fulfilment and appeal on the listeners. Consequently, festival songs are not performed in a vacuum; their performance transcends "art for art's sake" philosophy. It is aimed at reliving the philosophical thrusts of the milieu.

The quest for thanksgiving is the central motif of *Ìjusu*. Consequently, entertainment, celebration and communal expression of joy remain the core of the performance, as folks sing, dance and rhythmically hit their *ọparun* (scraped sticks) in concert with the drummers to heighten the festive mood. However, beneath the merriment lies the admonition motif, which entails moral indoctrination and social harmony. Many of the songs rendered during the festival are not merely for recreation; they are didactic vehicles designed to inculcate moral values, encourage upright conduct and sustain moral consciousness of the people. In this wise, festivals could be classified as indigenous learning institutions through which moral sensibility is activated. This is exemplified in "*Òbèlè*", whose thematic thrust is rooted in moral indoctrination.

Òbèlè yìí o, ọ̀mọ̀nà	The paddle is the torchbearer
Ọnẹ yò bèlè rẹ̀ sẹ́	He whose paddle breaks
Ó d'odò	Remains in deep water
Òyèré	This is wisdom
Ọnẹ yò bèlè rẹ̀ bọ́	He whose paddle falls
Ó dòréré	Remains in deep sea
Ọnẹ yò bèlè rẹ̀ sẹ́	He whose paddle breaks
Ó b'ódò lọ	Will be lost in the river

The song, "The Paddle", is laden with indigenous maxims and proverbs. It is rendered in solemn tune by high chiefs who are known as *Dòsu*. Indigenous maxims and proverbs are usually incorporated in folksongs to enhance the originality of the underlying messages. Proverbs are poetic texts that are embellished with cultural aesthetics and codes aimed at expressing and addressing prevalent issues in human societies. In the song, the "paddle" is used metaphorically as an object that gives a sense of direction. It is a metaphor for indigenous wisdom and knowledge. The song induces deep reflection on life as a journey. Every man and woman is likened to a traveller, voyager or sojourner who needs a symbolic paddle to scale through the hurdles of life. Paddle is an aesthetic object among the *Ìlàjẹ* whose major occupation is fishing. It is a symbol of cultural identity in the milieu. It is believed that every indigenous fisherman depends, to an extent, on the paddle for a successful fishing adventure and to pilot himself to his destination safely; hence, the paddle, a symbol of indigenous wisdom, must be handled with care.

The aesthetics of the song lies in its moral imports. The song emphasises the consequences of neglecting morality, a guiding compass in human society. Wisdom is power. It is a precious heritage that is far above rubies. He who has wisdom is stronger than thousands of powerful foolish men who are fully armed physically. This world is full of ups and downs; it is a world of mysteries. To tread safely in this world and avoid being lost in the sea of life, the indigenous

people, especially the elders, believe strongly in applying wisdom and having good human relations. As a boatman may not propel the canoe to the direction he desires without the paddle, no one can live a meaningful, successful and triumphant life without being wise and knowledgeable. In other words, success and longevity are tied to one's ability to comprehend existence and combat life hurdles with indigenous knowledge and age-long wits.
Festival songs are also performed with a view to admonishing and sermonising the folks on the need to desire and maintain peace and harmony in society. The song-text, "*Àn yìn ọ̀ràn nọ̀*", illustrates this quest:

Àn yìn ọ̀ràn nọ̀	Let's leave out lingering conflict
Jíka yí ògbìgbi lọ òkun	To roll away into the sea
Jíka yí ògbìgbi ò	Let it roll away
Jíka yí ògbìgbi kalọ òkun	Let it roll away into the sea
Àn yìn ọ̀ràn nọ̀	Let's leave out lingering conflict
Jíka yí ògbìgbi lọ ò	To roll away

Every society craves peaceful and harmonious co-existence. The world is a market where individuals trade their diverse attitudes daily. As such, there is bound to be conflict even when the people's gentle nature seems to transcend that of the sacrificial lambs. In other words, conflict is indispensable but not inevitable in human society. When conflict occurs, it is wise for the parties involved to manage it effectively. This probably accounts for Yoruba people's belief that tongue and mouth fight constantly; yet, they dwell in the same space and manage their misunderstanding. The song is, therefore, functional and moralistic as it emphasises the need to forgive and embrace one another in society. It serves as a conflict management or resolution tact realised in musical mode.

The moral commitment of the song is heightened by the use of nature imagery. The dominant imagery in the song is that of "sea waves". Through the deployment of parallelism, the song is a call to dissipate past wrong deeds to ensure a harmonious living. The folks are expected to allow the "lingering conflict" to "roll away into the sea". This brings to mind the imagery of the tide that is often subsided at the shore. In a metaphorical sense, age-long conflict is believed to have a negative effect on the psyche of the casualties and, as such, should be resolved instantly to ensure quietude and peace of mind. In this sense, the song is encoded with the intent of soothing the anger of the folks. The song speaks directly to the soul, body and spirit of the listeners, especially those who have the semantic knowledge.

Laden with emotions and rendered in fast tempo amidst dexterous drumming, the song serves as moral therapy and provides a channel for catharsis. The melodious rhythm of the song coupled with the conviviality in the performance arena sets every member of audience on dancing exploits. They are lost in the aesthetic flavour realised through the twisting of voices by men and women who constitute the chorus; hence, they sing out their hearts in ecstasy and emotional displays without a recourse to the past burdens, hurt and pains. Festivals, therefore, are dramatic performances that avail the folks the privilege of purging out grievances and pent-up emotions while embracing one another. They are, according to Omosule (2019), vehicles for transmitting information about the responsibilities of the folks in maintaining peace and harmony.

Some of the festival songs serve as moral allegories that address themes of contentment, respect for boundaries and communal co-existence. This is exemplified in "*Ó yẹ ọma Olíkàn ré*", a song whose figurative richness transforms tree imagery into a moral compass for social conduct.

Ó yẹ ọma Olíkàn ré	This befits the descendants of Olikan
Kòkòdìyà má à bínọ́ ọ̀pẹ̀	Let not the coconut tree envy palm tree
Èkíní igi, èkéjì igi o	The first a tree, the second a tree
Ọma sàghà-sághá tọ̀wọ́ nọ́kọ̀ lọ́kọ̀	The tree that encroaches on neighbours' canoes
Má mà tẹ̀ẹ́ ní tèmi ò ò ò	Encroach not on mine

"This befits the descendants of Olikan" is a chant-like song rendered specifically by women whose sonorous tunes hypnotise the ears, pierce through the bones and marrows of the audience and rent the air with joy and merriment. Chants are musical style usually in form of interlude during festival song-performance. Chants can be identified musically by their intonation, narrow melodic range, melodic contours and tonal register (Titus, 2015). They are dialectically known as "*lúse*", a kind of calculated rap pattern which is rendered tactfully with "precision and accuracy to make it perform its desired function or have anticipated aesthetic effects" (Ajimisan, 2016). The song has moral dispositions and reaffirms the need to embrace one another in society. Tree imagery is used dominantly to relay the indigenous philosophy of the people about life. Both "coconut" and "palm" trees have immense significance in the milieu. In *Ìlàjẹ-Ètikàn*, as it is in other parts of *Ìlàjẹland*, a coconut tree is seen as a life sustenance, a source of food beverage. Palm tree, on the other hand, is associated with festivity, strength and fertility. The fronds from the tree are used as ritual objects to ward off evil from the land. They are used to veil the shrines in *Ojú-Ọgwá* (the village square) in *Ètikàn* kingdom. In this regard, both trees are functional.

The lines, "Let not the coconut tree envy palm tree/The first a tree, the second a tree", deploy personification as a stylistic device that adds weights to the stern warning against class stratification in society. It is not an overstatement that every human society has elements of social stratification, though on varied levels. Even in a society rooted in communalism, there are still traces of stratification and inequality, which, in turn, brings about insecurity and lack of unity. It is practically difficult, if not impossible, to have a classless society as pursued by adherents of Marxist ideology. The ideology looks utopian, an age-long dream that defies realism. However, peace and harmony could be sustained if the proletariat and bourgeoisie are united and see themselves as one. By implication, the trees are used as moral metaphors for the ideal human relationship which should be devoid of envy, jealousy and unhealthy rivalry. The syntactic parallelism, "the first a tree, the second a tree", underscores the equality of both trees and, by extension, of all individuals, irrespective of the differences in status. It further emphasises the uniqueness of every human being. The song, thus, becomes an admonition to all folks in the milieu to see themselves as people of the same roots, descendants of *Olíkan* (the title of the traditional king in *Ètikàn* kingdom).

The last two lines of the song, "The tree that encroaches on neighbours' canoes/Encroach not on mine", contain indigenous philosophy that is full of moral lessons. The tree, "*sàghà-sághá*", is known for its ability to encroach on people's canoes. Its seeds fall indiscriminately on fishers' canoes and nets. The tree is personified and used metaphorically to depict people who

would always trespass on other people's domains such as land, house and farm. The lines pose a stern warning to potential intruders to respect boundaries and refrain from encroaching upon what belongs to others. Implicit in this admonition motif is the recognition that the observance of personal limits is fundamental to the maintenance of social harmony and peaceful co-existence.

Conclusion

Festivals are indigenous scripts that contain the philosophy, worldview and belief systems of the folks. Like other indigenous performances, festivals are not celebrated in a vacuum. They are usually performed with a view to achieving certain communal quests. These quests are projected through the performance aesthetics which include songs or musical performance. Songs are potent vehicles through which the philosophical thrusts of the people are conveyed in *Ìjusu* festival. The songs indoctrinate the folks on the virtues of personal responsibility, hard work, forgiveness and reconciliation, peace building, contentment, respect for boundaries and communal unity. According to Dasylva (2011), there is hardly any festival in the world that is not made up of at least two fundamental components, the spi-Ritual and entertainment. In light of Dasylva's view, *Ìjusu* festival entertains, educates, socialises, admonishes and sensitises the folks to the need for moral sustenance, social harmony and peaceful co-existence.

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